

# Socio-Economic Adaptation of Locally Integrated Refugees in Nigeria

Ahmed O. Ogunwale, *Ph.D.*

Crescent University, Abeokuta, Nigeria

E-mail: [asiwaju1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:asiwaju1@yahoo.co.uk)

Tel: +234-8035385838

## Abstract

Conflict, violence and political instability are prominent features in many parts of Africa. In most cases, the largely ethnic based conflicts have resulted in prolonged bloody civil wars which have produced a large number of refugees and displaced population. The civil war in Liberia that started in the early 1990s produced over 200,000 refugees some of whom were settled at Oru refugee camp in Ogun State, Nigeria. The Nigerian government was a major player in efforts to restore peace and stability to Liberia during the civil war that lasted for almost fifteen years. More than a decade since the war in Liberia has ended; some refugees feel they cannot return to their home country despite the formal closure of the camp in 2007. This study, through a field survey, employed questionnaire administration and focus group discussions (FGD) to investigate how the 'left over' refugees are coping with their new status in the absence of any formal assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) after the cessation of the aid regime. The findings revealed that majority of refugees that opted for local integration remain in the camp, struggled to adjust and cope with their new status but are facing some inherent challenges due to poor standard of Nigerian economy. Assisted voluntary repatriation to home country is therefore recommended so that the erstwhile refugees could use the skills acquired to make a better living in their home country.

**Keywords:** Socio-economic adaptation, refugees, local integration, repatriation, Oru, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of armed conflicts on the African continent with its aftermath poses a challenge not only to the people of Africa but also to the entire world. West Africa sub-region was indeed traditionally regarded as a region of relative stability with insignificant number of refugees when compared with other regions in Africa [1]. However, in the last three decades, the region has had its own share of wars and civil disturbances, which resulted into substantial refugee flow [2] Liberia for example, was devastated by long years of war during which almost half of the country's total population was displaced or forced into exile.

Although, Nigeria is not in a war situation, it is not spared of the refugee problem either. Internal conflicts in Nigeria, especially the Boko Haram insurgence and incessant farmers-herders crises have forced millions of people out of their homes. Over 2 million Nigerians were reported to have been displaced from the northeastern states of Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Plateau and Yobe while another 31,664 are confirmed refugees under the concern of UNHCR in neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroun among others. About 1,964 refugees from different countries are also residing in Nigeria [3]. Rather than abate, the figures of refugees and internally displaced persons keep multiplying in the wake of

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

wanton killings across the country. The challenges posed by the recent spate of conflicts in Nigeria therefore present an urgent need for the development of comprehensive and integrated researches designed to meet the complex and multi faceted problems of refugees as well as post refugees status.

In many refugee resettlement schemes, as it was at Oru refugee camp, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is usually designated as the primary operating agency with the responsibility of coordinating relief activities and ensuring that all refugees receive the basic minimal level of assistance [4]. The first batch of Liberian refugees to Nigeria arrived by sea via Lagos in 1990. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), settled them at Oru, about fifteen kilometers north of Ijebu Ode in Ogun State, on a campus of a former Teacher Training College. Most of the refugee assistance at Oru camp between 1990 and 2007 were carried out by UNHCR with the help of the National Commission for Refugees (NCFR); African Refugee Foundation (AREF) and the Justice, Peace and Development Commission (JPDC) of the Ijebu Ode Catholic Diocese.

The Nigerian government also played a major role in effort to restore peace and civility to Liberia during the war that lasted for more than a decade. When civil rule was restored to Liberia and general elections were conducted in 2005, many Liberian refugees went back home on voluntary repatriation and Oru refugee camp was formally closed in 2007. However, despite the formal closure of the camp and the invocation of cessation clause on the refugees from Liberia, some refugees

felt they could not return to their home country and therefore opted for local integration. At present, over 700 former refugees are still residing at the camp which also hosted refugees from Sierra Leone, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Somalia among others in the past 20 years.

This current study on local integration focuses on the economic activities of former Liberian refugees who were victims of civil war, racial or political persecution and are residing at the erstwhile United Nations refugee camp at Oru, Nigeria. It is obvious that whenever a refugee population is settled, a problem of adjustment to the new environment even for a short time will exist. Apart from housing, feeding and recreation, there is the key issue of what to do to earn a living or to prepare the younger ones through formal education and apprenticeship for gainful employment in future. Against the background of the reality of the numerous challenges of local integration arouse the eventuality to examine the process of social and economic adjustments of the Liberian refugees who chose to remain in Nigeria after the expiration of the aid regime and eventual closure of the refugee camp.

There was enormous effort by scholars in West Africa and Nigeria in particular regarding the general patterns of refugee movement prior to the end of the civil war and the eventual conduct of the general elections in Liberia in 2005 (see [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13] and [14] among others). Recent scholarly studies concerning the plight of the locally integrated refugees are however very few. The reason for the dearth of recent researches on refugees could be linked to the scholastic attention focused on several other internal problems facing the region. For

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

instance, literature on recent refugee situations in Nigeria consisted mostly of comments by International donor agencies, government officials and newspaper reports.

Focusing on the Liberian refugees while under the care of UNHCR, studies by [10] and [14] observed that rather than the passive benefactors and beneficiaries of aid relationship that usually existed between the donor agencies and refugees, Liberian refugees in Oru camp deployed ways to sustain themselves and facilitated their adaptation and development while in camp. The ability of some refugees to transfer their occupational status and skills acquired from Liberia played an important role in the degree of satisfaction they achieved during the period they spent at the refugee camp. Apart from reduction in the degree of dependency on sponsors, having a job also provided opportunities income that refugees needed to participate in social and cultural activities [6]. These successful occupational and economic adjustments could have promoted a willingness by some refugees to opt for local integration.

Recent studies ([15] [16] [17] and [18] among others) have emphasized the importance of forced migration but are less concerned about the cultural values and traits of refugees than the structural and economic effects of their incorporation into the domestic environment. Refugees are a category of international migrants but they are like slaves, forced migrants. Voluntary migrants by contrast move in order to better themselves in materials respect- economically and educationally. Voluntary migrants are subject to push and pull factors and may be of temporary or permanent nature. Either way, there is an option to return to the original

place of the migrant. Refugees have no such choice. Not only must they leave but also they must leave with the realization that they may never be able to go home again [11].

The environment of man is the aggregate of all conditions; physical or cultural under which he exists. We speak of an external environment when reference is made to the conditions imposed by the physical or human natures of the surroundings which man has little or no control and therefore faced with the problem of adjustment to ceaseless fluctuations. The success of any particular group of migrant such as refugees is very much dependent upon their ability to make the appropriate adjustment quickly enough.

Working on the premise of Lamarck's evolution theory, [4] stated that since no environment remains absolutely constant for any considerable time; changes in conditions create new needs while the new needs lead to new method of behaviour. In refugee movements, a new environment, calling forth new needs, causes the refugees to seek to satisfy those needs by making some kinds of efforts. The new needs lead to new habits and hence to modifications of old structures. Living from day to day forces the refugees to adjust to the new environment. For many refugees the dynamic element needed to attract them to the new culture and bring them satisfaction with their life is their present economic and social rewards (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2003). For survival, refugees must 'fit in' with their environments. Economically, a refugee is adapted to an environment with very little aid and it is observed that some refugees can survive without any form of aid, though, they will accept such if it is available.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

Repatriation is one cardinal solution proposed for resolving massive refugee flow[14]. The reasoning is that once fighting ceases and there is a return to normalcy, refugees should be assisted to return to their country of origin. However, this assumption has not been validated in many cases of refugee flow in Africa. Major reasons noted for the tardiness in returning voluntary are the fear of so many unknowns as well as high cost of reintegration into shattered economy and social fabric of the source regions due to calamities of wars.

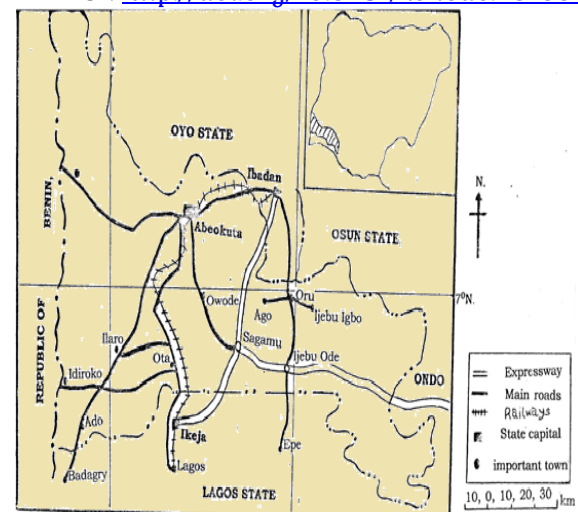


Figure 1: Map of Ogun State showing Oru

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

Data and materials used for this study were collected through field survey carried out in Oru, the host community of the closed UNHCR refugee camp (Figure 1). The entire residents (about 775) of the former refugees' camp were the target population. A structured questionnaire focusing on the socio-economic characteristics (age, sex, education, marital status, size of household), place of origin, length of stay in Nigeria, methods of adjustment, problems encountered, types and sources of skills acquisition and plan for the future formed the main instrument of primary data collection. Oral interviews and focus group discussions were also conducted to complement information gathered through questionnaire administration. One hundred and fifty (150) respondents (about 20 percent of the residents of the refugees camp) were interviewed through simple random sampling method from a total population of about 770 residents (i.e. the official number of refugees that opted for local integration in 2010). Both descriptive and analytical statistics (multiple regressions and Pearsons' product moment correlation) were used to analyse the data at  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

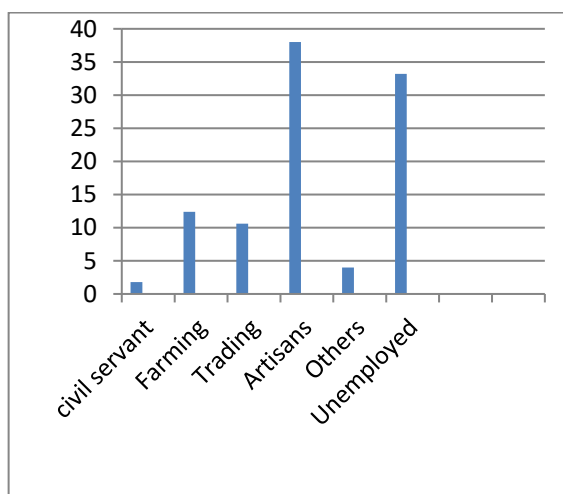
The population structure of the residents of Oru refugee camp is typically that of a migrant population which is usually characterized by imbalances in sex and age composition. There are more females (53.4%) than males (46.6%) and the mean age of respondents was 34 years. This is a reflection of the fact that majority of the Liberian refugees were females and many of them were very young on arrival in the 1990s. A large percentage (48.2%) of residents have between 5 and 7 family members while 23.5 percent others also have households that consisted of between 8 and 10 members.

On the average, sampled residents came from modest educational background. Only 22.6 percent of respondents 40 years of age and older had graduated from the Polytechnic with National Diploma. About 36.0 percent of respondents below the age of thirty years have however graduated from universities, polytechnics or colleges of education. This shows that many of the residents acquired tertiary education while in Nigeria with the hope of securing paid employments.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

Despite the improvement in the level of education in recent times majority of the residents are restricted to the informal sector of the economy. Only 1.8% of the respondents worked as civil servants while 12.4% are farmers and 10.6% engaged in trading activities. About 38 percent practice one form of craftsmanship or the other (arts and crafts, weaving of basket, and cane chairs, textile tie and dye, sewing and cloth designing, carpentry and bricklaying) while 4.0% engage in unclassified menial jobs and the remaining 33.2% were unemployed (Fig.2).

In terms of skill acquisition by various artisans, 32.4 percent of those engaged in the field claimed to have acquired the skills before departure from their home country, 57.0 percent acquired such skills from training received in camp while the remaining 10 percent acquired the skills as apprentices in the host community.



**Fig. 2:** Occupation Distribution of the Residents **Source:** Field survey, 2017

The sources of financing the establishment of their workshops are also diverse. While 25

percent of the respondents financed their projects from personal saving, 19.2 percent others got the equipment and materials from non-governmental organisations as donations and financial supports. The marketing of arts and crafts also yielded uneven returns. A handful of women (about 18%) succeeded in earning between N10000 and N15000 per month because of the perceived quality of their work, but many others were able to make only a fraction of this.

In terms of future relation and stay in Nigeria, there are three clear groups of people in camp. The first group (48.4%) consists of those who plan to return to their home country while the second group (32.6%) is made up of those who have made up their minds to settle permanently in Nigeria no matter the condition. The third group (20.0%) comprised of those that are indifferent to their present status but would not hesitate to resettle or relocate to another state within Nigeria or another country if they have the opportunity to do so.

A major component of the study concerned the social and economic adjustment of the former refugees. This is related to how well they have settled and become self-supporting from since 2009 when Federal Government stopped all forms of financial assistance to the residents. From the data collected on the employment status and occupation of the refugees, the modal form of participation in the Nigerian public sector is no participation at all. More than eighty percent off the female and over seventy two percent of males described themselves as unemployed. The jobless rate in this sample does not reflect unwillingness to join the labour force but inability to secure any meaningful paid



employment. There is no significant correlation ( $r=0.32$ ) between the level of education and income accruable to the residents. Liberian refugees with tertiary education and those who have acquired other academic qualifications could not readily secure employments in the public service since the country is faced with very high rate of unemployment even for the teeming graduates across the country.

Further still on occupational adjustment, about 12.4 percent of respondents engage in subsistence farming activities. However, while land is available, a major problem encountered is the size of farmland available for cultivation due to fragmentation of land by family members of the host community. The problem is more compounded since the refugees could not lay claim to any family land even though they are interested in farming. Due to the land tenure system in the local communities in Nigeria where land belong to the extended family members documentation for the purchase of land for farming is difficult. Most lands are fragmented; hence, interested farmers could not readily acquire arable land.

This study however discovered that vocational skills acquired prior to the outbreak of war in Liberia as well as those acquired during the aid regime at the camp have helped some refugees to raise income for their family upkeep. Artisans such as tailors, barbers, hairdressers, cobblers and furniture makers enjoy patronage from the host community and beyond for their artistic expertise and probably lower cost of service compared to indigenous artisans.

In terms of social integration to the Nigerian society, although the Federal Government of

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

Nigeria has proclaimed the left over refugees in camp as citizens of Nigeria, they are not recognized as such among the local ethnic group where they reside. Up to the time of this survey they were still been referred to as 'those Liberians' or simply as 'the refugees'. The outbreak of Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, Senegal and Sierra Leone which has already killed over 4,000 people is also having dramatic consequences on social and economic integration of the left over Liberian refugees in Nigeria. The host community sometimes discriminates against them for the fear of possible Ebola outbreak at the camp, even though these former refugees have not travelled to Liberia in the past 20 years. Quarantine measures, particularly in Lagos, sometimes prevent them from leaving the camps in search of livelihood activities in the city to complement the limited food basket, making them more dependent on assistance. In this situation, adequate food supplies became critical for preventing and combating malnutrition [19].

Above all, both the host community and the Federal Government of Nigeria have developed 'sympathy fatigue' towards the plight of the left over refugees. According to a recent pronouncement by the National Commissioner for Refugees (NCFR) the Federal Government said there was no more refugee camp in Nigeria, attributing the development to the fact that there was no more war in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Government and its agencies have therefore shifted attention to the integration of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) recorded from the deadly Boko Haram insurgence in the northeastern part of the country as well as the numerous victims of the farmers-herders crises across Nigeria [20].

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As this study has shown, refugees have proven acquisition of necessary skills that can lead them to become self-sufficient, to be capable and determined to look after themselves, and to adjust to their new environment, making the best of the available resources. In particular, they have shown that they do their best to create the right conditions to reach self-sufficiency, by favouring self-employment, attending vocational training and setting up of small scale enterprises. All these efforts are however being hindered by the unfavourable economic situations in Nigeria where poverty is widespread and the purchasing power of average citizens is low. Apart from this, tribal discrimination and ethnicity segregation in the country do not encourage local integration since non indigenes are hardly allowed to own land, participate fully in local politics or hold political offices in their places of residence.

This study therefore recommends the idea of voluntary repatriation as the ideal, best, preferred, and durable solution to refugee problem. Through repatriation refugees will return home, settle, integrate and contribute to the development of their country, using the new skills they acquired during the time they spent in exile. This will not only reduce the incidence of refugee flow from the source region, it will assist in finding a lasting solution to refugee problems.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wish to acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of the officials and residents of the former refugees' camp visited during the course of this study. However, the study is an independent

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

research without any external grant or financial support.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Lambo, D. (2003): Repatriation and Reintegration of Africa's Refugees: Patterns and Problems. *Africa Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies (CEPACS)* vol. 1 No 1. Pp 61-65.
- [2]. Ogunwale, A.O. (2016): Effects of Nomadic Migration on the Sustainability of Peasant Farming and Food Security in southwestern Nigeria. *International Journal of Education, Development, Society and Technology*, vol 4, issue 6, Pages 65-71
- [3] UNHCR (2014): Refugee Situation in Africa: Fact Sheets, Data and Statistics. Geneva. United Nations High Commission for Refugees publication.
- [4] Jadesola, S. B. (2015): Refugee Situation in Nigeria: Beyond Local Intervention. *Journal of Sociology and Human Behaviour*; vol 4 (2) pp 6-11.
- [5] Olusola, S. (1995): Refugees: Victims of Social Disintegration, *AREF Newsletter* 2(2) pp 4-5.
- [6] Odetola, A.M. (1997): Evaluating the Effectiveness of Counselling Services on Oru Refugee Camp, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Ibadan.
- [7] Akinyele, R.T. (2000): Power-sharing and Conflict Management in Africa: Nigeria, Sudan and Rwanda. *Africa Development* vol. xxv Nos 3 and 4
- [8] Nwolise, O.B.C. (2001): War making, Peacemaking and Conflict Resolutions. Lagos. AREF Publications vol. 2 pp 4-6.
- [9] Ugwuegbu, D.C (2001): Commentary: Mental Health needs of Liberian refugees in Nigeria. *The Journal of the International Institute*. Vol.8, issue3, spring/summer. Michigan, Michigan Publishing. University of Michigan Library. Available online at [www.quod.lib.umich.edu./commentary-me](http://www.quod.lib.umich.edu./commentary-me) accessed July, 2014

- [10] Owusu, M. (2001): Reluctant Refugees: Liberians in Ghana. The Journal of the International Institute, University of Michigan vol 8 No 3 p.1.
- [11] Dick, S. (2002): Liberians in Ghana: Living without Humanitarian Assistance. Geneva. Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR.
- [12]. Afolayan, A.A. (2003): Dynamics of Refugees Flows and Forced Repatriation in Africa. Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies (CEPACS) vol. 1 No 1 pp 66-80
- [13] Oluyemi-Kusa, D. (2003): Conflict and Refugees Generation in Africa with notes on Semantics in Refugees Studies in: Haruna, H.B; Nwolise, OBC and Oluyemi-Kusa, D (eds): A guide to Peace Education and Peace Promotion Strategies in Africa: The Nigeria Approach. Lagos. AREF publications.
- [14] Ogunwale, A.O. (2004): Socio-Economic Adaptation of the Residents of the United Nations' Refugee Camp at Oru, Ogun State, Nigeria. Unpublished Dissertation, submitted to the Department of Geography, University of Ibadan.
- [15] Crowell, M and Nutsugah, E. (2013): Status of the Liberian Refugees: the Leftovers of Buduburam. Available online at [www.modernghana.com](http://www.modernghana.com) accessed August 2015.
- [16] Martins, F.O.A. (2013): ECOWAS Refugees in Ijebu and Lagos are Nigerians. Available online at [www.gamji.com](http://www.gamji.com). Accessed September, 2015.
- [17] Sani-Kangiwa, H. (2014): No more Refugees Camp in Nigeria: reported in Vanguard Newspaper, Feb. 22. Available online at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/>
- [18] Panapress (2012): More Liberian Refugees opt for Repatriation. Available at [www.panapress.com](http://www.panapress.com) accessed May 2014.
- [19] The Nation Newspaper (2014): Why we are Still in Nigeria, by Liberian Refugees. Available online at [www.thenationonlineng.net](http://www.thenationonlineng.net)
- [20] Ogunwale, A.O., 2018 Implications of the Recent Pattern of Nomadic Migration on

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2516376>

Food Security and Sustainable agriculture in Nigeria. Paper presented at the 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Nigerian Geographers held at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>.